

## THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE

Speech Delivered by Governor Roberto Sanchez Vilella of the  
Commonwealth of Puerto Rico on the Occasion of  
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President Fawcett, Members of the Faculty, distinguished guests, fellow graduates:

It is very seldom that a man can get two academic degrees for the effort put into one. It is stranger still to be a Doctor of Laws having studied mathematics, mechanics and structural design. But so be it. I accept the honor bestowed upon me by this beloved Alma Mater, knowing I deserve more the degree I earned with a pencil in hand than that which is given me today. However, I am sure the Puerto Rican people will help me justify this new honor by achieving great deeds during my tenure in office.

### I.

Almost a third of a century has passed since I was where you are this morning. In June 1934, G. Bromley Oxnam spoke to my graduating class about the solidarity of the human family and the supremacy of the common good. Today, thirty-two years later, the human family is still not united and neither is the common good supreme. The hopes and dreams of the world of 1934 are still to be achieved. Today we are standing in time almost equidistant from that occasion and the year two thousand. I will not talk to you about great hopes you will find unfulfilled thirty-four years from now. Let me stand on less lofty but

much more solid ground. I want my words to have a better fate.

Let me discuss with you the complexities of a truism. One of the great poets of your culture has posed the problem thus: "Let the great world spin forever, down the ringing grooves of change." In the more practical words of the greatest man of letters of my own culture, "never look for birds of this year in the nests of the last." And in my own words, let me discuss with you today, the challenges of change.

The year of my graduation was one of grave industrial warfare in the United States, of consolidation of tyranny in Europe, of United States withdrawal from Asia and the Caribbean, of poverty and despair in Puerto Rico. The year of your graduation is one of industrial peace in the United States, of consolidation of democracy in Europe, of deep United States involvement in Asia and the Caribbean, and of progress and hope in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. In a sense, it is as if the world had made a 180° shift on its historical axis. Since time and history have contracted immensely, a much greater shift can be expected in the next thirty years. It is not only change, but its speed, what characterizes our world, and what will shape its future. I come to make you aware. You must be ready.

## II.

We Puerto Ricans have become of late a people deeply conscious of abrupt, dramatic change. It is by now our modus vivendi. We all wanted to change in 1934: from colony to self-respecting country, from poverty to progress, from inertia to action. We began six

years later, by spearheading a peaceful political and social revolution. By changing the voting habits of our people we began to transform our society. The results are astounding to all, except to us. We wanted it that way, and so we made it.

Let me give you some figures on the dimension of change in Puerto Rico from the year of my graduation to this day of your own. Annual Net National Income has risen from less than two hundred million dollars to more than two thousand million. Net Per Capita Income has rocketed from less than a hundred dollars a year to almost one thousand dollars a year. Life expectancy has jumped from forty years to more than seventy. Illiteracy has decreased from more than 35% to less than 13%. Change produced change. Change wrote a success story.

In Puerto Rico, despair has been transformed into hope, dependency into dignity, poverty into progress, inertia into action, all in less than thirty years. It is only natural that for those of us who participated in leading that revolution, change should remain the means to make progress, the means to solve.

We do not, of course, seek the new for its own sake. Nor do we accept it merely because it is inevitable. Instead, we see in this process of updating the old, of meeting the demands of accelerating change, an opportunity:-- the opportunity to give even more meaning and reality to the ancient values of human dignity and individual worth.

Ours is a humanistic civilization. Our values are humanistic values. No community has ever made these values a reality for all its citizens, however. Not Puerto Rico; not the United States; not Europe; not the old nations of Latin America or the new nations of



Africa or Asia. That which increases the hopes and opportunities of men, which builds schools for their children and gives them work with dignity, leisure with meaning and a firmer grasp of their own destinies, to that extent is good. Our efforts to cope with change in Puerto Rico in the past have been always guided by this fixed belief. And so will be our struggles in the future.

It is therefore, only natural that this be my only advice to you today: step up to the times; but better still, step ahead of the times. Be always ready for drastic, dramatic change. Be ready for the world to change; and if it doesn't be ready to change the world.

### III.

Let's take the simplest fact to describe the way the world has been transformed in the past thirty years. Today, it would take me five hours instead of five days to get here from San Juan, in one of two hundred flights instead of one single passenger ship leaving the island each week. In the next few years a new airplane now on the drawing board will travel 2,000 miles an hour and will carry 1,000 passengers. By that time, San Juan will be as far from Columbus as Cleveland is from us now.

These facts speak for themselves, but they serve only as a reminder of a much more important one: the world is getting to be very small, and we are coming much closer together. The basic fact about the world today is our very own proximity to all other human beings. Suddenly, almost without notice, "unsurmountable" frontiers like oceans, rivers, mountains, are losing relevance. Science has broken the barriers and erased the frontiers

long before politicians even realized that they were gone. In some cases, the only real boundaries of a country that still remain are the men who speak for its people. The basic, the fundamental question of today is: Will politics -- will political science even -- be able to cope with this revolution of human contiguity?

Political instruments in the world today are inadequate and obsolete. Political institutions and habits are running far behind scientific advances and human realities. Political wisdom is lagging in the great progress achieved by human knowledge. The time has come in which we can accept as a scientific fact the possibility of total destruction. And yet, political atavisms are rampant in the middle of efforts to prevent the holocaust. Political unrest and instability in developing countries is due to disenchantment with the political orders of our epoch. Old concepts, worn-out institutions, cannot cope with the challenge of rising expectations and of rising frustrations. We must devise new formulae so that human needs and aspirations will not wait more in vain. We need to make a science out of politics, without it ever ceasing to be an art.

The attempts during this century have been directed to getting all nations under a single roof. The League and the United Nations have been only frail efforts. What has not been recognized as yet is that we already are under one roof, our own human-made roof of Sputniks and Gemini capsules, of "early birds" and satellites. It is no longer a question of whether the United Nations will succeed, or whether coexistence will survive. It's either the actual uniting of nations and peoples -- or no nations. It's either coexistence -- or nonexistence. There are no alternatives. The United Nations are still far behind because



its members are too far apart, sitting next to each other. In fact, even the concept of coexistence may be already anachronistic. Existing side by side is not enough. Cooperation is the inevitable choice. Can people closeted in a small room be far apart? Can they not coexist in this new sense? These are the rhetorical questions of today.

The challenge of change before the world is no other than to continuously update ourselves and our institutions. I would not ask you to go out of this University to do the tasks of today. Those are being done already. You will have to do today the tasks of tomorrow; and by the time you do them, your achievement will be already obsolete. Do not work for yourselves, but for your offspring. Do not work for your present, but for your fellow's future. The lightning speed of change today requires you to give, to be able to keep. You will have to be generous to be wise, and you will have to be wise to be creative.

#### IV.

The main lesson I have learned in the last fifteen months, the task, the immense and heavy task that has rested on my shoulders since January 2 of last year, is to direct the destinies of three million people, while enabling them to face and do today, the great task of tomorrow. The people of Puerto Rico have faced for many years the problem of their political status. It has, in fact, obsessed some of our people in the past. Nowhere else in the life of our island are we in greater need of political wisdom in the face of ever present change.

The majority of us believe in Commonwealth status, created by compact, based on common United States citizenship, developed to the maximum that may be agreed upon between

Congress and those of us that support it, and validated by the votes of our people. The essential elements of our relationship to the United States -- in the context of Commonwealth status -- are all contained in Joint Resolution No. 1 of the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico, as approved December 3, 1962. Those essential elements are: (1) a fundamental law that establishes the nature of the relationship as one of dignity and mutual consent; (2) the recognition of our sovereignty and juridical equality; (3) our common citizenship; (4) common defense; (5) common currency; (6) free trade; and (7) our common loyalty to democracy; (8) the definition of the respective powers of the Puerto Rican and United States governments; (9) a mode of participation by the Puerto Rican people in the powers exercised over them by the government of the United States; and (10) a contribution by Puerto Rico to the general expenses of the government of the United States. The present Commonwealth relationship can face change now and in the future, because it is and will always be subject to improvement and even perfection; but always within the bounds of those essential elements. That is our belief and our goal.

There are others who believe we should become a federated state of the Union or an independent republic. These three alternatives -- or others similar to them, but always three -- have been discussed for the last hundred years. They are now being discussed again in a Joint Commission created for that purpose by the Congress and our Legislature. The Commission was empowered to study "all factors" which may have a bearing on the present and future relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, to render a report and make recommendations.

## V.

For the first time in history, the Puerto Rican status debate has been taken to the conference table. On the men around it, rests the challenge of change. Theirs is the responsibility of political wisdom. They have an extraordinary opportunity to do, at least, these things:

First, recognize that Commonwealth status has the attributes of equal political dignity; a dignity based on the principle of mutual consent and on a bilateral compact.

Second, support in principle the essential elements of Commonwealth status, as we understand them to be, and not subject to change to another status unless desired by the Puerto Rican people and agreed to by Congress.

Third, create a mechanism that can apply these principles to the realities of a changing world, from time to time, and recommend the necessary changes and adjustments in the specific application of such principles.

Fourth, recommend that a plebiscite be held, under the laws of Puerto Rico, in which the three forms of status be submitted in consultation to the electorate of Puerto Rico, and express the conviction that participation in that plebiscite is a responsibility of all parties advocating a status formula and of all citizens able to vote.

Fifth, recommend to the governments of the United States and Puerto Rico that, upon the result of such plebiscite being certified, steps be taken to implement the decision of the people.



Nothing less than this can satisfy the need of Puerto Rico in this modern world and in the future. Nothing less than this will face up to the challenge of change.

## VI.

Important as its work is, the real, the clear solution to the political status question cannot be expected just from the deliberations of the Status Commission. The decision as to our own destiny is -- and will always be -- in the hands of the people themselves. One of our great patriots told our people many years ago: "La fuerza está en el país" -- you will find your strength here at home. This will always be true. Years after the Commission, years after the plebiscite, years after all of us and all of you, the people will be facing the challenges of change, and the people will be again deciding. There can be no strait-jackets for a people. There can be no limit to the freedom of men.

No country, and much less Puerto Rico, can abstain from participating in the revolution of human contiguity; a phenomenon of such dimensions that even "revolution" is too limited a term for it. We in Puerto Rico embarked in 1940 upon a path of change, and we stand now at the threshold of development and of success. In the words of a national periodical: "not yet developed, yet no longer underdeveloped, [Puerto Rico] stands betwixt and between. . . a demi-developed society." The alternative to stop is no longer ours. We are already beyond the point of refusal. If we put on the brakes, we are going to crash. And so we must continue to change, to improve, to alter to succeed. Our people must be ready now, and be ready tomorrow and forever, to change and to decide, and to decide anew.

## VII.

We have a definite role in their decision. I must help them make the wisest choice, whatever it might be. I want to help them think without limits, without strait-jackets. I want to help them give flight to their imagination, to conceive and believe in new solutions. Solutions all based on the challenge of a changing world.

We made a creative effort fourteen years ago and devised Commonwealth, a concept still new. It can become still newer in the next fourteen years, and the choice can become even wider. We must rededicate ourselves to the task of continuously updating that political concept, in accordance with the new realities.

Let the words of our martyred President become our own guide: "A great new edifice -- he said -- is not built overnight. It was 11 years from the Declaration of Independence to the writing of the Constitution. The construction of workable federal institutions required still another generation. The greatest works of our Nation's founders lay not in documents and in declarations, but in creative, determined action." So must we act today, building tomorrow. After all, it is only change, action and creativeness. And we have done them all before.

We can even improve on the groundwork of the founding fathers. Puerto Rico believes in Commonwealth status. We can secure its rightful place in the niche of American constitutional creativeness. We will need to redefine some concepts, we will need to revise some attitudes, we will need to act so as to create. We will need to believe in a much closer world.

And we means you and me, the people of the United States and the people of Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico, I assure you, will do its part. I am sure you are willing to do yours.

Fellow graduates of Ohio State: all of you will have in the year 2,000 the age that I have now. If you begin to think now about the problem I have posed today, you will be much wiser then than I am now. Let us confront change with creativeness and challenge with action. May you become now what I aspire to be. Let us all try to earn the glorious title Walter Lipmann gave Adlai Stevenson upon his death: "he was a new man of the new world."

Thank you.